Comments Presented to the House Committee on Government Reform

and the Committee on Agriculture

Hearing on

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy

Expanded Surveillance Program Plan

On Behalf of

The National Cattlemen's Beef Association

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By

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I am Gary Weber, Ph.D., Executive Director Regulatory Affairs for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association. The National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) is the largest organization representing America's cattle industry. Initiated in 1898, the NCBA is the industry leader in providing education and in influencing the development and implementation of science and risk analysis-based public policy to protect the health of the U.S. cattle population, provide safe and wholesome food and improve producer profitability. In this regard, the NCBA also strives to preserve the industry's heritage and ensure our future.

We appreciate this opportunity to share with you our perspectives on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) Expanded Surveillance Program Plan.

In order to effectively put into perspective the expanded surveillance program plan, it is important to use as a reference point the actions taken in the United States since the disease was first identified in the United Kingdom in 1985. I have enclosed a time line in my written testimony that illustrates the actions taken by the USDA since 1989 to prevent the introduction of BSE into the U.S. and to monitor the U.S. cattle population for the disorder.

The time line also lists the comparable actions taken by other countries around the world to deal with BSE. One important point clearly differentiates the United States from other countries in the world with cases of BSE. The U.S. has a history of being first when it comes to preventing BSE. We were the first country in the world without the disease to

ban the importation of cattle, beef and beef products from countries with BSE. We were the first country in the world without the disease to begin a BSE surveillance program. This program began in 1989 and has continued to be supported by and expanded as deemed appropriate by both Republican and Democratic administrations. We were also the first country in the world without the disease to ban the use of feed ingredients for cattle that had been identified as being capable of transmitting the BSE agent. Last but not least, we were also the first country in the world without the disease to carry out an independent, comprehensive analysis of the risk of BSE and the prevention measures that have been put in place. By contrast, the European Union and some Asian countries did not initiate BSE safeguards until well into the advanced stages of disease spread. This fact makes scientific comparisons between the situation in North America and other countries invalid.

All of this history, a history of being aggressive and proactive in preventing BSE for over 14 years, leads us to today and this hearing on the expanded BSE surveillance program plan.

The expanded BSE surveillance program represents an action recommended by an international review team, assembled by the USDA, that were asked to analyze our BSE status and prevention measures. This group was organized in response to the identification of BSE in a cow of Canadian birth origin in the United States identified as a result of our existing BSE surveillance program. The international review team suggested we establish an expanded surveillance program to confirm the assumptions

made in the previous risk assessment that the disease prevalence in the U.S. was very low, and if present, the disease was being eradicated as a result of the current feed restrictions. The NCBA supports conducting this one-time, large scale testing program to estimate potential disease prevalence.

The expanded testing program will provide data that will be capable of determining if the disease is present at a frequency of 1/10 million animals in the higher risk population of animals with a confidence level of at least 99 percent. The U.S. cattle population in the higher risk age range is estimated at around 40 million head. The expanded surveillance program thus is designed to detect the disease if as few as 4 animals from this population have the disease.

Under the current surveillance program, the USDA has established a network of approved laboratories to contribute to the national BSE surveillance effort. It is our understanding that the laboratories are using one of the rapid test systems. It is also our understanding that the automated testing systems in place are being operated in a very sensitive mode that may produce a fairly high level of inconclusive test results that prove to be negative when verified by the gold standard test, the immunohistochemistry (IHC) method. The labs are sending all inconclusive samples to the National Veterinary Services Laboratory (NVSL) in Ames, Iowa. In an effort to provide for transparency, all laboratory results are posted on the APHIS website at the end of each work day. The NCBA supports the efforts of the USDA to be open and transparent with the data from this testing program. The only issue we have is that USDA and the laboratories must use

the best quality assurance programs possible to ensure the quality of the test results. We do not want them to miss any true inconclusives but we also do not want a high number of inconclusives reported that are simply an artifact of the normal variations in the operation of the testing systems.

The NCBA has offered our support in ensuring the USDA has access to as many animals in the targeted risk population of cattle as possible for this expanded surveillance program. Data from this expanded surveillance program will be important for many reasons. If the data indicates our long-standing BSE prevention programs have been effective, then staying on that course will be sufficient to continue to protect animal health in the United States. If the data indicates our status is other than expected, the NCBA will work to analyze the situation and determine what, if any additional science and risk based measures may need to be taken to protect animal health.

Thank you again for this opportunity to share our views with you. I look forward to your questions.